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Consuming for an Imagined Future: Middle-Class Consumer Lifestyle and Exploratory Experiences in the Transition to Adulthood

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Abstract

This study examines middle-class consumption and lifestyle during the transition to adulthood in the United States. Based on analysis of qualitative data from interviews with emerging adults between adolescence and settled adulthood, we argue that middle-class emerging adulthood is marked by a focus on exploratory experience consumption: the consumption of novel experiences with cultural capital potential. This tacit, embodied orientation is rooted in a habitus developed during entitled childhoods but is also shaped by an anticipated shortage of opportunities for exploration after they marry and have children. Accordingly, middle-class emerging adults voraciously consume exploratory experiences in the present with their imagined future selves in mind. The class basis for this orientation is examined through our analysis of interviews with working-class emerging adults whose lifestyles are characterized not by exploratory experience consumption but by a desire for the familiar, a fear of the unknown, and a longing for stability. The discussion focuses on how the middle-class consumer orientation toward exploratory experiences reinforces class (dis)advantage, life trajectories, and inequality.

Keywords: social class, experiential consumption, emerging

adulthood, inequality

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Young people are entering adulthood during a time in which certain forms of knowledge—broadly labeled "soft skills"—are becoming increasingly important (Balcar 2014; Carnevale 2013). Such knowledge, when deployed successfully, becomes a form of cultural capital, providing those who possess it advantages not just at work (Powell and Snellman 2004; Rivera 2015; Thompson and Tambyah 1999) but also in interpersonal relationships (Cherlin 2014; Illouz 2007) and even parenting (Lareau 2011). Soft skills are difficult to define but include characteristics like creativity, communication, flexibility, proactiveness, and life-long learning; they are distinctive precisely because they are "intangible," hard to measure, and "closely connected with attitudes" (Balcar et al. 2011, 9). Such forms of knowledge are, in Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) terms, embodied cultural capital, tacit dispositions of the habitus inculcated via childhood socialization, which cannot be easily taught or inferred from formal credentials.

Consumption scholars have extensively studied how cultural capital is distributed and deployed during adulthood as well as how it is transmitted to children through parenting practices. However, the process by which childhood knowledge is further developed to build cultural capital in early adulthood has been underexamined. This study fills this gap by examining middle-class lifestyle during the stage in the life course known as emerging adulthood. We ask: what consumption and lifestyle practices enable young adults to embody such forms of knowledge in ways that reinforce class advantage? Through analysis of in-depth interviews, we find that middle-class emerging adults hold a unique disposition to voraciously consume what we call exploratory experiences: novel, challenging, nondomestic experiences that are learning oriented and have cultural capital potential. This embodied orientation,

while shaped by dispositions developed during entitled childhoods, is also driven by an anticipated shortage of opportunities for exploration after they settle down to marry and have children. In this "prospectively retrospective" process, middle-class emerging adults consume exploratory experiences in the present with their imagined future selves in mind.

To understand if this exploratory experience orientation is class-based, we analyze interviews with a comparative sample of working-class emerging adults and find clear lifestyle differences. Rather than seeking external challenges with an eye toward a settled future, working-class young adults focus on overcoming past personal challenges. Not only do economic and social insecurity make exploration risky, but experiential consumption is neither considered possible nor idealized. Instead, they long for a settled, traditional lifestyle in the present.

This study heeds the call by McGill, Peracchio, and Luce (2011) for more cross-disciplinary research by contributing to literatures in consumer research, emerging adulthood, and cultural sociology. In explaining what exploratory experiences are and why they are valued by middle-class emerging adults, we also theorize how this consumer orientation builds cultural capital useful for getting and performing jobs in the knowledge economy, developing romantic and professional relationships, and later socializing one's own children, thus reinforcing class-based trajectories and advantages. By theorizing exploratory experience as a bridge between entitled childhoods and imagined futures, we show how a middle-class habitus can generate differences in lifestyle over the life course. Finally, our approach introduces a consumption perspective to the sociological literature on how orientations toward the future contribute to class inequality.

HABITUS, CONSUMPTION, AND EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Consumption, Class, and Life Stage

A robust literature has evolved linking social position to consumption among adults (Carfagna et al. 2014; Holt 1997a; Jarness 2015; Karademir-Hazir 2014; Katz-Gerro 2002; Peterson

and Kern 1996; Moisio, Arnould, and Gentry 2013; van Hek and Kraaykamp 2013). According to Bourdieu's (1984) theory of habitus, consumer practices in adulthood are guided by taken-for-granted dispositions acquired in childhood, subtly naturalizing and reifying social status through practice. This perspective has provided fodder for a range of consumer research on social class. Holt's (1997b) analysis adapts Bourdieu's categories of social class distinction to analyze differences in consumer dispositions and lifestyles among settled middle-class and working-class Americans. Thompson and Tambyah (1999) historicize the middle-class cosmopolitan orientation, while Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013) deepen understandings of distinction in the lower classes. Allen's (2002) work on teenage college choice mirrors these findings, showing how consumption choices are guided by embodied, class-based orientations. Meanwhile, Henry's (2005) research connects class differences in self-concept to feelings of empowerment in consumption. Most recently, researchers have built on Bourdieu to illuminate how consumers learn and embody new practices (Arsel and Bean 2013; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Maciel and Wallendorf 2017; Üstüner and Holt 2010).

Most of this research focuses on adults without explicit focus on adulthood as a life stage. Some research explicitly examines the relationship between consumption practices and life stages in childhood (Chaplin and John 2007; Cook 2008; John 1999; Johnson and Mollborn 2009; Pugh 2011), among the elderly (Barnhart and Peñaloza 2013; Schau, Gilly, and Wolfinbarger 2009), and across family generations (Epp and Price 2008; Karanika and Hogg 2016). However, there is particularly little attention to consumption practices and cultural capital formation in emerging adulthood, a historically new life stage with potential to shape future opportunities and constraints.

Emerging Adulthood and Social Class

Recent scholarship identifies a distinct life stage between adolescence and full-fledged adult life that psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2006) calls emerging adulthood, a period of self-focus and self-exploration. Emerging adulthood shares features of adolescence, as both are periods of identity formation and role

confusion (Erikson 1959/1980). However, emerging adulthood is both demographically and experientially distinct (Arnett 2000). Most adolescents have not completed any of the traditional milestones on the way to adulthood, whereas most middle-aged adults have accomplished all of them. Emerging adulthood, by contrast, is fluid, with tremendous variation in the timing of life course transitions. In contrast to the baby boomer generation, emerging adults in the United States and Western Europe now take longer to leave the parental home, complete school, get a job, achieve financial independence, marry, and have children. The order in which these transitions are completed—if they are ever completed—has also become less sequential. A rise in living arrangements involving neither nuclear nor extended family means many young adults experience a long period of living independently between leaving the parental home and marriage (Fischer and Hout 2006; Furstenberg 2010).

Pathways through this relatively new life stage vary by social class. While the age of first marriage has steadily increased, college-educated individuals are now more likely to marry; this is especially true for men (Schneider 2011). Very few Americans with higher education have a child out of marriage (9%), and most describe their children as planned (71%) (Pew 2010). By contrast, half of women with only a high school diploma have a child outside of marriage, and more than half say their children were unplanned. Although the desire to marry does not vary by class, the premium placed on financial security does: lower-income and less educated Americans are much more likely to say that the ability to support a family is essential to being a good marriage prospect (Edin and Kefalas 2011; Pew 2010).

How emerging adulthood is experienced also varies by class. Much of the literature on emerging adulthood celebrates it as an opportunity for extended choices and personal fulfillment. Less recognized is how lifestyle during this life course stage may serve as a new mechanism for cementing class divisions. In a critique of the psychological literature on emerging adulthood, Silva (2013) argues that while middle-class young adults might enjoy a period of exploration and possibility, their working-class counterparts experience increased responsibilities and constraints. They come of age amidst disappearing blue-collar jobs, a complex and costly

higher education landscape, and shrinking family and social support. These challenges render desired adult milestones, such as earning a post–high school degree, moving into one's own apartment, or landing a steady job with benefits, difficult or even impossible. Childhood disadvantages compound into adult liabilities, and working-class emerging adults feel forced to grow up faster (Côté and Bynner 2008; Furstenberg 2008; Johnson and Mollborn 2009; Silva 2012). By contrast, the typical middle-class emerging adult remains destined for a traditional life course sequence: first leaving the parental home, then completing formal education, then marriage, followed by children. These transitions, however, happen later than they used to, and the period of living apart from parents and prior to marriage (or cohabitation, which is increasingly common) has gotten longer. Demographers highlight the economic utility of these changes, particularly for high-status women who delay marriage and childbearing to invest in their educations and careers (Somers 1993; Vitali et al. 2009).

A lengthened transition to adulthood provides middle-class emerging adults with time not only to build a résumé but also, we argue, to cultivate new consumption practices. Recent research documents increasing demand for and returns to "soft skills," competencies such as adaptability, creativity, communication, and grit (Balcar 2014; Carnevale 2013; Heckman and Kautz 2014). While such characteristics may seem innate, they are in fact learned dispositions (Heckman and Kautz 2012). Researchers have begun to uncover the class-based dimensions of soft skills, which become a form of cultural capital at work (Morrison 2014; Rivera 2015) as well as in personal relationships (Cherlin 2014; Illouz 1997, 2007). We build on this literature by linking the development of these valued traits to middle-class consumption practices.

Emerging adulthood, which has developed due to social and economic shifts, produces new "structuring structures" (Bourdieu 1990). As Bourdieu argues, actors improvise in new situations, creatively transposing existing knowledge and habits into new social games; yet the form of such improvisation is shaped by one's past experiences and social class background.

In emerging adulthood, habitus thus may manifest in new ways, engendering new (and understudied) mechanisms by which class trajectories are reproduced and reinforced through consumption. Our analysis demonstrates that the voracious consumption of exploratory experiences among middle-class emerging adults differs both from lifestyles of settled adults and children reported in the literature, and from those of working-class emerging adults. We theorize that this lifestyle orientation provides embodied knowledge that could be a source of advantage in the future. In other words, for those in the middle class, exploratory experience consumption has the potential to become cultural capital transposable to other contexts across the life course.

RESEARCH METHODS

To address our research question, we analyze two sets of in-depth interviews. The first is with middle-class emerging adults, collected specifically to analyze middle-class lifestyle during the transition to adulthood. In the course of analysis, our emerging theory of middle-class exploratory experiences led us to seek comparative data on working-class young adults to understand if our findings are indeed class-specific. As a result, we also analyze an existing data set of in-depth interviews with working-class emerging adults. Each data set and approach is described in turn. A complete listing of interviewee characteristics can be found in appendix A.

Interviews with Middle-Class Emerging Adults

Our primary data set consists of in-depth interviews with 18 middle-class emerging adults. Our selection criteria for emerging adults were that respondents should be young (22–33) and have an independent family status—that is, be residentially and financially independent of their parents but without dependents of their own. All but three are unmarried. Our selection criteria for "middle class" included having a college degree and either full-time employment or full-time enrollment in graduate school. Most of our respondents also met sociologist Annette Lareau's definition of middle-class children growing up in households with "at least one parent employed in a position that either entails substantial managerial authority or that draws upon highly

complex, educationally certified skills" (2002, 751). Likewise, our respondents either occupy such positions themselves or are following a work or educational trajectory that will likely yield them. These demographic and socioeconomic profiles make our respondents useful informants for understanding middle-class consumption during emerging adulthood. Financially and residentially autonomous yet lacking spouses or children, they have fewer responsibilities and community ties than do those at other life course stages. This provides an opportunity to understand consumption choices, as individuals are forging their own lives and have relative freedom to spend time and money as they wish.

Participants were recruited in one medium and one large city to take part in a study on post-college, pre-marriage life. A variety of techniques were employed for recruitment, including electronic postings, requests during face-to-face interactions, and snowball sampling over a three-year period between 2005 and 2008. Potential respondents were initially screened based on age, marital status, and social class, but care was taken to find both range and redundancy across age, gender, and experiences through the recruitment process.

Interviews were loosely structured and employed a combination of phenomenological (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1990) and long interview techniques (McCracken 1988). The data set also includes some supplemental observational data and home photographs that were either brought to the interview or requested afterward. Interviews started with: "Tell me about yourself." Participants were encouraged to provide a general life history, describing their lives from growing up to the present. Many were also asked to imagine their lives in five years. They were not initially asked directly about experiences they sought; instead, informants brought up things that they do, have, and want in the course of talking about their lives. Follow-up questions further probed the meanings behind their actions and goals, as well as their material and experiential consumption. Interviews purposefully did not focus on one type of experience but rather allowed consumers to talk about a broad range of experiences to understand the salience of experiential consumption.

Data collection was intertwined with analysis over an extended period, allowing emergent themes to guide subsequent interviews. Data analysis began with grounded theory techniques (Corbin and Strauss 2007; McCracken 1988; Spiggle 1994). Sampling and interview techniques were refined as unexpected categories emerged. Once exploratory experience developed as a core theoretical construct, three married individuals were recruited as boundary cases of young adults with more settled lives. Also, as the future-orientedness of exploratory experience became apparent, questions were added to the end of interviews to probe this orientation. Some respondents went through sentence completion tasks, using stems such as "This is the time in my life to…."

Interviews with Working-Class Emerging Adults

Our comparative data consists of 29 working-class emerging adults. These informants were selected from an existing qualitative study of the transition to adulthood among 100 working-class men and women. From the larger sample, we selected respondents who mirrored the middle-class informants on key demographic characteristics: young (24–34), residentially and financially independent of their parents, and without dependents of their own. All but one were unmarried, and one was divorced. These informants grew up in working-class families where parents did not have college degrees and held working-class jobs such as truckers, mechanics, daycare providers, and clerical workers. The majority of these respondents have only a high school diploma and work in food service, customer service, retail, and security. Two have stable jobs as firefighters. Five attained more than a high school degree —two have associate's degrees and three have bachelor's degrees. These upwardly mobile informants serve as boundary cases to examine how consumption preferences and practices shift as individuals cross class lines.

Participants were recruited in two cities between 2008 and 2010. Recruitment took place at service sector workplaces where they were asked to participate in a study concerning "what it's like to grow up today." While participants were mainly selected for social

class and life stage, variation was also sought on employment and family background. Importantly, while the Great Recession of 2008 exacerbated the insecurity experienced by these informants, it was not the sole or even major determinant of their economic struggles with low wages and contingent work. Interviews began with a life history. Participants were asked to describe their coming-of-age experiences, to identify times when they felt grown up, to reflect on their biggest challenges, and to compare themselves to their own parents. They were also asked how they spent their leisure time and how they envisioned their futures.

Analytical Approach

The analytical focus of this article is on the middle class, as our primary goal is to understand the role of consumption in constructing cultural capital and reinforcing high status boundaries. Although we have comparative data sets, our goal is not to develop a complete cross-class comparison of lifestyle. We first developed our theory of exploratory experience as a middle-class disposition through extended engagement with the middle-class interview data. The working-class interview data was subsequently analyzed to understand whether the disposition toward exploratory experience is indeed more prevalent in the middle class. Thus, our explication of working-class lifestyle is necessarily incomplete, as it is mainly a story of what they do *not* experience. For robust sociological analyses of working-class emerging adulthood, see Silva (2012, 2013).

Our analysis proceeds as follows. In the first major section, we describe middle-class informants' voracious consumption of exploratory experiences and theorize this disposition's value in terms of potential to accrue cultural capital. The middle-class basis for this disposition is supported by contrasting data from working-class respondents who are oriented toward familiarity and home, not exploration. The second major section analyzes the underlying drivers of this middle-class orientation as a temporal connection between childhood dispositions and imagined futures; here we again employ a contrast with the working class. Finally, the discussion section details implications of our findings for consumer and sociological research on

lifestyle, consumption, and (dis)advantage.

THE VALUATION OF EXPLORATORY EXPERIENCES BY EMERGING ADULTS

The word "experience" derives from the Latin *experiential*, which means to try. Both the noun and verb forms signify trial or knowledge gained through participation or observation. Consumer researchers find that people are attracted to intangible experiences for their psychological benefits, such as feelings of fun (Holbrook et al. 1984), happiness (Nicolao, Irwin, and Goodman 2009), escape (Belk and Costa 1998; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Kozinets 2002), and even productivity (Keinan and Kivetz 2011). There is also evidence that certain collectively consumed experiences provide feelings of communality (Arnould and Price 1993; Holt 1995).

Historically, privileged young adults have focused on experiential consumption during the short time prior to marriage. Emblematic is the eighteenth-century European grand tour, standard fare for single, upper-class, young English men—and later women—completing their social and cultural educations (Black 2003). Today, researchers also find differences in how adults from varying social positions value and consume experiences. Certain types of experiences, such as arts attendance, provide cultural capital with effects ranging from educational attainment to marital selection to institutional closure and racial exclusion (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Ostrower 2004; Shaw and Sullivan 2011). Holt (1997b, 1998), in an application of Bourdieu's theory of taste to the United States, found that adults with high cultural capital value intangible experiences as well as distinctive, domestically oriented consumption practices. We find that middle-class emerging adults value a particular subset of experiences, which we call exploratory experiences.

Middle-Class Orientation toward Exploratory Experiences

The experiences our informants seek out have a distinctive set of qualities: they vary widely across domains, provide a sense of

novelty combined with depth of perspective, present doable challenges, and are oriented away from the home. In the section that follows, we describe each of these qualities in turn and then move up a level of analysis to theorize why these particular types of experiences are valued. Due to space considerations, in explicating the core qualities of exploratory experience, we present only brief examples from our interview data; see appendix B for additional supporting examples.

Voracious Variety Seeking

The exploratory disposition is characterized by a desire to voraciously sample a wide variety of experiences. The locus is consumption; however, this disposition produces homologous practices across a range of domains—including work, residential moves, and romantic relationships, as well as dining, entertainment, and travel. Thomas is emblematic of this orientation. He is 32 and grew up on the East Coast with a pediatrician father and psychologist mother. His parents, he reports, encouraged him to learn, to value family, and to pursue an interesting career. He attended a highly ranked public university far from home, graduating with a degree in political science and history. After an extensive job search, he took a position with a tutoring company abroad, for which he worked in multiple countries. There, he became interested in nonprofit management and moved with a girlfriend to Canada to obtain an MBA. He subsequently moved (single) to take a job in publishing in a large American city, where he now works in development at a large nonprofit.

Thomas spends much of his time and money engaging in exploratory experiences outside the home. He participates in sports: he is a member of a running club, rides his bike (finding new routes online), and is learning to surf. He volunteers as a tutor and board member at an organization serving refugees and low-income immigrants. He has joined a culture club that brings in speakers and hosts classes, and he dines out, searching for new restaurants with varied cuisines. He notes:

> It's incredibly easy on foot or on a bike to explore so many different places. I live off of [Z] Street, and there's

> an amazing amount of restaurants and things to do. And little things such as my running club or the [culture club]. It's like a way of feeling as if you have access to college classes, even though you're not in college. They are just little seminars for an hour—I've gone to things on water conservation; they have one on food, security that is very relevant to my job, baseball, just all sorts of things. So, it's a little more eclectic and fun than college, but it's just a good way of keeping your mind engaged. Little things like that are easier to come by in the city.

At another point, Thomas brings up the types of restaurants he frequents:

> Nothing fancy at all. A basic place where I live is this restaurant called [Thai House], but there are a variety of different foods. There's just so much to take advantage of here. My running group goes out after every track workout, so we'll do a different place every time, whether that's pizza or crepes or Indian food or whatever.

Thomas values living in an urban area because it provides opportunities to sample from a variety of experiences.

The rationales Thomas and our other informants do *not* offer for why they like living in cities are also revealing. They typically do not explicitly invoke ideologies such as a belief in new urbanism. They do not seek out familiar experiences like going to national chain restaurants around the city. They do not discuss the vast selection of material goods available for purchase in the city's shopping centers. Instead, Thomas describes "do"-ing different places, a verb often used to describe productivity (Keinan and Kivetz 2011), but which is also a synonym for travel and exploration. This indicates that he seeks more from these restaurants than physical sustenance after a run.

Consuming a broad array of exploratory experiences is a form of cultural omnivorism, a middle-class consumption style that values variety and embraces both highbrow and popular activities (Peterson and Kern 1996). The association between this cultural

style and markers of social status has been widely studied and is now "the most well-documented empirical generalization in the sociology of cultural taste" (Fishman and Lizardo 2013). A related dimension of high-status lifestyle that we observe in our data is "voraciousness"—that is, the "insatiable quality of contemporary cultural consumption" (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro 2007). The omnivorism literature tends to examine breadth of consumption within specific domains, such as music (Savage and Gayo 2011), reading (Zavisca 2005), or dining (Warde, Martens, and Olsen 1999). Here we see omnivorism expressed across a variety of domains, both within the field of consumption and beyond.

Similar practices across domains signal a taken-for-granted underlying disposition, since the "basis for the homologies... between different areas of practice is the application of practically interchangeable schemes of the habitus" (Bourdieu 1990, 250). Indeed, experiential exploration is embodied, as it seems to come naturally, although not effortlessly. Our middle-class informants do not explicate why they seek such experiences, just that having them is optimal. They use a language of "luck" to describe valued experiences ranging from landing a new job to finding a great place to live to happening upon a local restaurant, experiences they perceive as a product of whim, happenstance, and spontaneity. Yet the places and activities they allow themselves to "fall into" have specific attributes. For example, Nalya, a 26-year-old law student from a small town, describes moving to Washington, DC, for an internship "on a whim," "it was kind of one of those big leaps that you take in your life." She describes the resulting experience as "kind of crazy, but really fun" and that "it just so happened" that a job opened up where she was interning, which she happened to get. These events were not, of course, truly random: they were guided by her interest in politics but also by her attraction to "fast-paced, high-visibility environments," and her aversion to places—like her hometown—that she sees as "closed off" and "boring." Our informants' luck is made as much as it is fallen into, but, as members of the middle class, they feel fairly confident in their luck (Henry 2005).

Deep Novelty

As Nalya's criticisms about her hometown suggest, not all

experiences are equally valued. Exploratory experiences have a novel aspect. When asked where she likes to go, Hillary, age 28, reflects: "That's kind of the big X factor… I'm always kind of looking for something new to try, and do, place to go… When the opera starts up again… there's some sort of young professionals thing… I might join that… That kinda thing." Other experiences with similar resonance include: Thomas taking classes on "little things" that he doesn't know much about; Nalya taking a job in a new city because she has not been there; Maria dating a different kind of partner; and Jane exploring new neighborhoods.

Novelty alone, however, does not suffice to give exploratory experiences value; they should also have depth. Although prolonged engagement is perhaps needed for deep learning, our informants balance the tradeoff between novelty and depth by seeking an insider's perspective as they explore. This is apparent as Thomas reflects on his time teaching abroad:

> It was a great experience. Mainly, just getting the opportunity to live in another country, in another culture. It certainly wasn't the Peace Corps, and nothing was altruistic, but it was great just being immersed in three very different cultures. And the nice thing about teaching is that the teachers take you under their wing a little bit, and you really get to see, both from the students' and the parents' view, much more about the society, the pressures that they go through. And just life. It's very different than going on vacation there.

Learning to see as a local provides the sense of legitimate knowledge necessary to move beyond the tourist gaze (MacCannell 1976). As a result, emerging adults like Thomas seek to go off the (perceived) beaten path, observing and interacting with locals to gain a deeper understanding of a place in a shorter period of time. This allows them to not simply check experiences off a list (Keinan and Kivetz 2008) but to maximize learning through the novel experience.

Accordingly, these emerging adults do not typically seek out frequent getaways like cruises or beach vacations (stereotypical working-class or family destinations) because they are not

perceived as novel or challenging (unless ironically; see Ollivier 2008). This dismissal of conventional tourist destinations and taste for an insider's perspective is in itself a typical touristic disposition among experientially oriented consumers (Thompson and Tambyah 1999). As Hedegard (2013, 19) concludes in a study of capoiera tourism in Brazil, "quality of participatory experiences… may be a new means of differentiating and status claiming." Omnivorism is broad but not democratic: it is a marker of cultural capital precisely because it draws distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate styles of consumption (Johnston and Baumann 2010; Savage and Gayo 2011; Warde and Gayo-Cal 2009).

Deep novelty is clearest in exploratory travel experiences, a hallmark of cosmopolitan "willingness to engage with the Other" (Hannerz 1990, 239). However, insider perspectives can also be acquired closer to home. Any setting that can be constructed as an Other worth engaging can become a source of insider knowledge, from job roles and relationships from which informants could learn to visiting new areas of town. Jane, a 30 year old working in information technology, describes how her company's culture allows for deep novelty to be continually cultivated: "I liked switching roles every couple years, because it kept things interesting. Because you get bored. After a while when you're doing the same thing day in and day out, you want a new challenge, and so that was what was nice, our boss allowed us to do that…you'd go to the boss and say, 'Hey, can I try this person's job and can we switch,' and then, if everybody was in agreement, you all switched." In addition to the rotational job program that the company offers new employees, this type of job switching for established employees provided a continuous stream of novel experiences, challenging learning opportunities, and evolving insider perspective.

Opportunities for deep novelty are often "spatially embedded" in gentrified neighborhoods (Zukin 1990), in which ethnic restaurants' survival depends on their appeal to gentrifiers' taste for both variety and authenticity. This came through in many interviews. For example, Maria notes the advantages of living in her current city: "[In other places] you drive down the highway and you see one Target [big box store] after another, it's kinda nice to be in this place where it's all different types of stores, and

different types of people." William, originally from a rural Midwestern community, distinguishes: "I like to eat at [locally owned] Mexican places [in this southwestern city]... They're authentic...." Similarly, insider knowledge of music or film can also be "emplaced" via expressions of taste that signify knowledge of local contexts of production. Such experiences are valuable because "elites use place meanings to indicate which objects signal high status cultural capital" (Cheyne and Binder 2010).

Doable Challenges

Experiences valued by informants often have an element of challenge, pushing informants outside their comfort zones. Linda (25) strives to leave the country at least once a year despite having one of the most limited budgets in the middle-class sample. She selects vacation destinations on the basis of challenge:

> AU1: What makes [a vacation destination] a "no go" on your list of places to go?
>
> L: I guess it just doesn't feel like a challenge. I'm kinda done with Europe. I've been there so many times that it doesn't feel like a challenge anymore. Asia feels like a challenge. I mean any place where you have to get inoculated against like crazy deadly diseases, that's the challenge. But, Canada just kinda feels like, having to drive eight hours to go to Canada. I'll just stay in America.

Exotic diseases could be a metaphor for the broader challenge Linda seeks: her cultural resources enable her to push herself beyond experiences she has already "done" even as she "inoculates" herself against "crazy deadly" risks. At times, when finances have been tight, she has had to make compromises—for example, adventuring over the other border to Mexico. Other middle-class participants also seek challenges that seem achievable: learning to surf, taking wine classes, attending concerts, or traveling abroad. Activities sought are within their abilities but not so easy that everyone does them.

Exploratory experiences are often bundled together: for instance,

moving to a new city, dating someone new, joining a new club, and getting a new job all at once. Navigating these simultaneous transitions presents another form of challenge. Hillary describes seeking balance while pushing herself in multiple new domains after a move:

> It's hard moving to a new city; you have to be on all the time…it's hard to relax and have people that you just can be with. In that sense, being home is—obviously, your parents like you no matter what you do, so it's easy to relax. But…moving to a new city, it's tough to make it a home and establish the links and friendships and stuff.

At another point, when discussing her moves, she says:

> H: It was pretty scary. You're kinda out of sorts and you don't really know a lot of people and it's kind of just, oh, what did I do?
>
> AU1: Is that a good scary or is it a bad scary?
>
> H: It's a good scary. It's good to challenge yourself, and there's not a lot of people who do—you understand why people don't move often, why they stay in one place a lot, 'cause it's scary to pick up and go somewhere new where you don't know anybody. But, at the same time it's a good scary. I don't know….

Hillary contrasts accumulating experiences with the familiarity of home and family, imagining the comforts one might feel in foregoing the challenges of exploration. This is a problem of privilege, no doubt, but a perceived problem nonetheless.

Certainly, informants learn from exploratory experiences that foster doable challenges. However, exploratory experiences, particularly those that are challenging, also produce stories for which the value is either anticipated or realized later. This is evident as Maria describes volunteering with AmeriCorps (a service organization for college graduates):

> I had a great experience in AmeriCorps. It's definitely really, really tough living on $700 a month, and I spent

> $350 in rent, and there was not much left over for anything else. At the same time, I was coming out of college and doing a federal work study. The first couple months, I thought I was rich. You know like, oh, this isn't so bad. But it was a really intense experience. You're with like the same group of 12 people, doing some really intense work. I'd go home to a room where we had substandard plumbing, and I had an extension cord going from the front of the house to the back, and that was for six months! Later on, it was three of us in a very tiny two-bedroom. So that was awful. But it was a great experience. I really liked it.

Like Thomas's time in the islands, Linda's trips to Asia, and Hillary's exploration of her new city, Maria's account of her AmeriCorps experience highlights the characteristics of novelty, insider perspective, and challenge, which engender learning and feelings of mastery. However, these attributes of exploratory experiences also provide fodder to tell particular narratives about the self.

To elaborate, experiences are grasped and communicated through stories; constructing one's narrative hinges on selecting certain life events as pivotal and cutting away others as unimportant (Bruner 1986). Unlike other kinds of accounts, narratives are always both temporal and moral (Ewick and Silbey 1995), narrating the self over time and closing with a moral message (White 1987). In the example above, Maria selects the *challenging* aspects of her experience as the pivotal moments in her unfolding narrative; while her self in the beginning is uncomfortable, she comes to appreciate the difficulty of living with substandard plumbing and electricity. The moral message of the ending is clear: triumphing over discomfort leads to positive self-growth and self-transformation, "a great experience." Narratives stemming from exploratory experiences could serve as valuable capital in the labor market, as they communicate soft skills such as adaptability and persistence.

Nondomestic

Because exploration involves a quest for the unfamiliar and

uncomfortable, middle-class emerging adults deemphasize domestic consumption. Disinterest in cultivating a stylized space is apparent in Nalya's narrative of moving across the country:

> I had nothing. I just moved there with clothes. So my roommates and I would buy a $30 couch off Craigslist. We would try to kinda sparsely furnish. We moved into this three-story row house. It was so ideal, like what you would think in your mind; it was just really cool. But we had like no furniture. So, I had to buy a few things, a mattress and stuff like that. But, we slowly filled it up through used furniture, like hand-me-downs. Some people were from the area, so they had parents there. So, it was a very bachelorette, weird lifestyle.

Linda also describes moving without things:

> L: And then when I moved, I needed more stuff. I mean, I didn't have any kitchen stuff, no furniture; I got rid of the bookcase and the futon frame, because my studio has a loft bed with bookcases on the side and everything. It's awesome. And I just happened to be working at a place where my coworker had access to all this leftover furniture. (Laughs) So, I got like a couch and a chair and a little table…and they're so uncomfortable and they're just so horrible. Pretty much everything is secondhand in my apartment.
>
> AU1: Did you have any of that, had you bought any of that stuff before? Even in your former houses, all your other addresses?
>
> L: No. I've always moved into furnished places. And that was very deliberate, because I didn't want that stuff. Because it still sort of freaks me out a little bit that I have all this stuff and that I've been here for so long. I only got here seven months ago, but this is the longest I've lived anywhere since I graduated from college. (Sigh) It's a little weird. I feel a little settled, and I don't necessarily like that feeling. Although I'm getting used to it. But I think part of the reason that I like the

> secondhand stuff, not only because it's cheap and I can afford it, but that I can just toss it out if I would need to. Nothing is particularly special. Give it away.

While both Nalya and Linda see their behavior as "weird," across informants we observe that time and money is not heavily invested in cultivating a particular home aesthetic (Arsel and Bean 2013). Instead, most furniture is simply generic "stuff." Our informants are not antidomestic per se. For example, Nalya describes her temporary housing as "cool" but not because she is excited about cultivating a domestic space. Rather, it is cool because its structure (three-story row house) and living arrangement (with several roommates) are emblematic of the young professional experience in this iconic city. Unlike the global nomads that Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould (2012) describe, these informants do own some material things that ground them. However, instead of buying matching, costly furniture that will last for years, they cobble together what they view as "disposable furniture" from secondhand stores, from places like IKEA, or from friends and family, which they imagine they could resell or give away when they move or marry.

For middle-class emerging adults, being ascetic is more than an aesthetic. Buying a couch from a thrift store or having an empty refrigerator signifies experiential opportunity because such things do not tie them down. Holt (1998) observed that consumption of material objects has low salience for settled adults with high cultural capital. However, his informants' homes are filled with thoughtfully curated items with a particular design aesthetic that are imagined to be permanent. Here we see something quite different. While middle-class emerging adults' underlying tastes might not be far from those of their parents, the things they accumulate and the meanings they assign to them differ in this life stage. This allows even those who do not move as often as Linda to feel like they could, keeping their experiential options open. As a result, material objects receive a smaller share of both wallet and heart (Day 1989) than do exploratory experiences. Similarly, domestic activities were rarely described. Some cook, but those that do describe health or financial reasons for doing so. These are not narrated by most informants as

culinary adventures or exploration opportunities, and descriptions are typically only offered upon probing. While there are some house parties and occasional dinner parties, these are not the focus of time, energy, and thought. For most informants, exploratory experiences are not sought or created at home.

Some do own or are considering purchasing a home. However, even homeownership does not necessarily entail domesticity or a commitment to place. Zach owns a house, yet he describes wanting to live in a variety of places. AU1 asked him about the apparent contradiction:

> AU1: You mentioned that you want a job that would send you places internationally. What would happen if your company says we've got an opening in England…
>
> Z: Uzbekistan?
>
> AU1: Or, Uzbekistan, yeah? What would you do with the house?
>
> Z: Rent it. It's close enough to the university. I plan to hold onto it for a pretty long time, actually.
>
> AU1: Whether you stay here or not?
>
> Z: Yeah. The reason I bought around that area is because there is a viable rental market, and the house is just going to continue to appreciate. I'd really like to get a couple more, but I really don't have the cash flow for that right now. But think about it: I'll always have a place to retire if I want to. And if I need money, I can just flip it and get a couple hundred thousand dollars out of it at any time.
>
> AU1: Wow.
>
> Z: So it's kind of nice like that. It's just an extra layer of security. And while I think some people look at mortgages as a big ball and chain and shackle that you attach yourself to— "well, I'm stuck with this crap forever"—if you look at it from my standpoint, it's almost like a security blanket. You know I can always

> sell it, get out from under it and make money, and I can always come back here. It's nice.

For Zach, the house is an economic investment, not a constraining lifestyle commitment. Other informants (interviewed just before the 2008 economic downturn) also justify their house purchases as something that can easily be sold or rented if another opportunity comes along. Owning a house also does not necessarily mean filling it with long-term furnishings. John, a 26-year-old manager, bought a large house as both a dwelling and investment. While the size of the house suggests a lifestyle commitment, the interior tells a different story. He says, "There are some rooms that I haven't even touched. It's way too big, 2,000 square feet. I just never furnished some of my rooms." John has chosen not to make this house a home.

Our informants are not ideologically committed to reducing or questioning material consumption (Cherrier 2009). Certain items are carried from place to place—clothing, books, individual durable items, photos, mementos, and gear to facilitate experiential activities. They do not anticipate that this aversion to domesticity will last forever. But for now, they create the opposite of what McCracken (1989) calls homeyness, eschewing the comfort that this cozy, settled aesthetic conveys.

Of course, our informants do have experiences at home. Whether an experience is domestic, however, is not a function simply of where it happens but of how it is interpreted. Our respondents emphasized nondomestic meanings even when describing setting up house. For example, in telling the story of moving in with her boyfriend, Alexa emphasizes exploration outside the home for the things that will go in it:

> A: I think that [helping him shop for furniture] was a learning experience that I never would have predicted, and a great growth for our relationship.
>
> AU1: How was it a learning experience?
>
> A: Looking at houses in general, it's not necessarily the buying the stuff, but just driving around every weekend

> and walking in and looking at places, and even the frustration of getting lost. Because we were trying to hit so many in a certain amount a time, and, you walk in and there's all these people there, and all this stuff, and it was a lot like teamwork and communication and stuff like that.

Moving thus becomes a story of outside exploration involving driving, searching, and even getting lost. Notably, in reflecting on what she learned from this experience, she emphasizes relational skills of communication and teamwork, not the particulars of setting up a house.

Potential Cultural Capital

The core qualities of exploratory experiences—varied, novel, challenging, and nondomestic—share an orientation toward learning. Thus, we theorize that voracious consumption of exploratory experiences provides middle-class emerging adults with embodied knowledge, which could contribute to the stock of "decontextualized" cultural capital described by Hannerz (1990) and Thompson and Tambyah (1999). Yet experiential knowledge becomes cultural capital only if it can be deployed to gain advantage. To do so, individuals must appropriately transpose and extend knowledge from past experiences to new contexts with analogous properties (Bourdieu 1990; Sewell 1992), such as when interviewing for a job (Morrison 2014; Rivera 2012). Put differently, they must adeptly pull out the right knowledge, at the right time, in the right way, in future social, romantic, and work contexts.

To clarify, middle-class emerging adults do not approach exploratory experiences solely as rational actors, deliberatively extracting useful knowledge from strategic experiences. On the contrary, they often interpret their activities as spontaneous and whimsical "improvisations" (Bourdieu 1977). However, as Calhoun (2002) elucidates, "the capacity to produce such improvisations—and thus actions—is developed through lengthy processes of learning. These are simultaneously processes of 'inculcation' by society and social fields...and active self-creation" (15). In other words, while social institutions such as family and

school have socialized middle-class children to view learning as worthwhile and enjoyable, much of the knowledge they take with them is a *byproduct* of learning through their unfamiliar and unexpected experiences, not a goal in and of itself.

Such transposability is evident in narratives such as Maria's on the benefits of her AmeriCorps experience: "I realized whatever situation I get into, I can figure out how to support myself. And especially when you're working with homeless populations, and, you're like, okay here I am crabbing because I can't go to Starbucks, but I still have a roof over my head, and a lot of people don't necessarily have that. So, I think it also helped just kind of appreciate and put things into perspective for me." AmeriCorps could simultaneously be "awful" and a "great experience" because of the contextual knowledge that Maria uses at her current job doing policy and advocacy for a nonprofit focused on food insecurity. As a middle-class young adult with a prestigious education, Maria has not experienced real poverty and likely never will. Yet her capacity to imagine the experience of poverty has become what Bryson (1996) calls "multicultural capital," on which she draws as she builds a career in public service. In short, we theorize that mastery of specific challenges can contribute to generalized adaptability and capacity to excel in a range of situations.

In sum, our middle-class informants are voracious consumers of exploratory experiences, keeping up a frenetic pace of activities that are varied, novel, challenging, and nondomestic. These experiences provide a broad knowledge base of socially valued competences that can be deployed to gain advantage in varied contexts, now as well as later in life. In other words, exploratory experiences during emerging adulthood contribute to embodied cultural capital. In the next section, we examine the class basis for this disposition through analysis of our sample of working-class emerging adults.

Working-Class Orientation toward Familiarity, Domesticity, and Skills

Although both working and middle-class emerging adults appear unsettled in their lives, their lifestyles stand in sharp contrast.

Unlike middle-class informants, who experience the world as full of options and learning experiences, working-class informants' lives are characterized by the absence of choice and a sense of disappointment or even betrayal by employers, partners, family, and institutions. The places they grew up are familiar but often not the comforting, safe environments where it is "easy to relax" like middle-class Hillary describes. Instead, these working-class emerging adults learn to trust only themselves and turn inward, often embracing individualistic therapeutic language to try to overcome trauma such as getting laid off, failing out of school, losing a home, or growing up in an unstable family (Silva 2013). This desire for stability and self-reliance manifests in lifestyle preferences for the familiar and comfortable.

Differing Consumer Lifestyles

When asked what they do for fun, working-class emerging adults most commonly answer that they play sports, play video games, hang out, help friends with household projects, and sleep in. Benjy, a roofer's son who now works as a firefighter, explains: "We go out, we just hang in and play PlayStation, drink a lot of beer." Mindy, who works in a women's clothing chain and relies on her credit card to pay her monthly bills, shrugs: "I hang out with my friends. Pretty much nothing but sit and watch TV or do whatever." She continues: "I like sleeping; sleeping is like my favorite thing to do. I'm always tired. So when I can, if I'm at home I just sleep." In contrast to middle-class preferences for the unfamiliar and nondomestic, working-class respondents prefer to spend time at home and to visit familiar places.

For some (especially men), working on the home is a preferred pastime. Tim finds do-it-yourself home projects satisfying: "I like to build things, because at the end of the day you can see what you've done." Our middle-class informants infrequently discuss home improvement projects (although that might change as they transition to middle age), and when they do, they frame it as a learning experience or investment in an income property. For Tim, the main draw is the sense of satisfaction with the material result. The orientations of these emerging adults mirror research on masculinity of settled adults, where those with higher cultural capital treat home improvement as experiential "class tourism,"

while those with lower cultural capital treat it as "instrumental" housework (Moisio et. al 2013, 311–2). Working-class respondents more often use the language of watching than the language of doing, another key class difference. Ellie, a 26-year-old nurse's aide, notes: "I like *The Biggest Loser*. I find it inspirational even though I really don't go out and exercise that much." Similarly, Rob, a 26-year-old man who is unemployed, relies on reading and watching movies for entertainment. He describes:

> Fantasy, science fiction. Dean Koontz is one of my favorite authors. Pierce Anthony and Robert Jordan are my top three; I love those guys. I like the way they write; you feel like you're there. Like I forget about everything. I would read a 500-page book before lunch. Obviously if I have a job or something I am not doing that, you know, but as of right now I can sit down and realistically read a 500-page book in the space of a day… I do have movies. Like I said, I have 700 movies that I flip through and find something to watch.

Rob voraciously consumes movies and popular novels that provide him feelings of adventure—"like you're there"—without leaving the familiar context of home. He does not use these media to learn about other cultures or frame them a proxy for learning-oriented travel he cannot afford; rather, they are an escape, entertainment to fill his day.

Across working-class interviews, we do not observe an omnivorous drive to constantly try new things, whether cuisines, jobs, or cities. Heather, a 26-year-old bartender, enjoys going out to eat at the same restaurant and watching football every Sunday with her boyfriend. Similarly, traveling is focused on the familiar. Vinny, a 27-year-old security guard who likes to attend sporting events and play poker, has been to Las Vegas several times for vacation; he explains: "I like to play poker. Go to Vegas a lot. I do travel a lot. Nothing crazy." Whereas middle-class Linda craves travel experiences that require inoculation against "crazy deadly diseases," Vinny emphasizes that vacations need not be "crazy" to be satisfying. Routine, relaxing, and entertaining vacations are preferred.

For some, the affinity for familiarity extends into fear and avoidance of the unknown. Tim, a 26-year-old former Marine who now works in automobile services, describes the difficulty of working with people from other countries: “We actually have way too much diversity in the company for my mind. A lot of diversity from the Asian people, people from Asia, people from Africa with a heavy African accent, a lot of European people. And try to bring all these different cultures together in one building and to get them to work together.” At times, cultural differences represent another obstacle, not a sought-after site of exploratory learning.

Differing Valuation of Experiences

Class differences also emerge when we examine how informants interpret experiences that, at first glance, resemble middle-class exploratory experiences. Working-class emergent adults also value new experiences where they can learn. However, the types of experiences and forms of knowledge that are valued differ. Working-class emerging adults who join the military exemplify these differences. While the military offers a chance to travel and see the world, none of the respondents who enlisted cite these reasons for joining. Tim views his military service mainly as a means to a job. As a Marine, he repaired diesel engines, and immediately after concluding his service, he got a job in automotive customer service. Tim values his military service not for cultivating soft skills but rather for developing concrete skills that help him succeed in the civilian labor market.

Higher education is another domain in which nominally similar experiences are valued differently. Working-class informants approach higher education as a place to acquire hard skills and credentials more so than transposable knowledge. For example, Tom, an electrical engineer who describes himself as “never really good at school,” opted to attend a vocational high school to get practical experience in electronics. His grandfather, an elevator operator, and his father, an electrician, both entered the field at a time when a high school degree sufficed. However, they told Tom that he would need a college degree, especially in light of his father’s struggles to advance without one. After six years of attending college part-time, Tom earned a degree in electrical engineering and reports that he “absolutely love[s] the job.” His

approach to college as a training mechanism contrasts with middle-class informants, for whom college was an opportunity to explore various interests through classes, extracurricular activities, and dorm life.

The types of challenges that middle-class respondents report as positive learning experiences—the "good scary" of moving jobs and cities and foregoing domestic comforts—are experienced as risky hardships by working-class respondents who do not have the resources that might provide a safety net or lead to "luck." Over the last five years, Rob, the unemployed informant with the extensive video library, has stacked lumber, installed hardwood floors, landscaped, and poured steel at a motorcycle factory. While these could be seen as exploratory experiences, Rob does not share this view; he bounces from one help wanted ad to the next out of necessity, not in search of variety. His only steady source of income since high school has been his National Guard pay, and although he recently returned from his second deployment in Afghanistan, he is considering a third out of financial necessity:

> I am looking for a new place. I don't have a job. My car is broken. It's like, what exactly can you do when your car is broken and you have no job, no real source of income, and you are making four or five hundred dollars a month in [military] drills? Where are you going to live, get your car fixed, on five hundred a month? I can't save making five hundred bucks a month. That just covers my bills. I have no savings to put down first and last on an apartment, no car to get a job. I find myself being like, oh what the hell? Can't it just be over? Can't I just go to Iraq right now? Send me two weeks ago so I got a paycheck already!

Rob's frustration with his lack of control over the challenges he faces contrasts with the sense of mastery over cultivated instability among middle-class informants. This class difference is one of disposition and circumstance, not of tolerance for risk or capacity to cope with uncertainty. After all, Rob is preparing to serve in Iraq, which is far riskier than the work or travel experiences of our middle-class interviewees. But the certainty of a steady paycheck makes another deployment worth it; the

potential for exploratory experiences abroad are neither sought nor considered.

Narratives about experiences also differ by class. While middle-class emerging adults seek out new experiences that create narratives, their working-class counterparts draw upon past experiences and try to retell them in more empowering ways. As Silva's (2013) study of working-class young adults reveals, narratives of growing up center on overcoming adversity through emotional growth, weaving the language of self-help, unprompted, through the interviews. Similarly, Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013) find that marginalized working-class residents of a trailer park relied upon self-narratives of moral triumph over financial and personal hardship, such as poverty and domestic violence, and strove to maintain order and stability in the present. Kathleen creates a narrative of overcoming adversity due to a mentally ill mother and alcoholism as a teenager. She now tells a powerful story of breaking free from her family history: "I mean, it was a struggle, but that's the same with growing up. You know, I started drinking because I didn't want to feel the pain, almost like the abandonment issues with my mom? And with my dad working all the time, I never really saw him. But after that I decided I was going to make something of myself." Kathleen now uses her leisure time to build her identity as a strong, empowered person—watching inspiring Lifetime movies and "singing, listening to music... I make every moment a good moment. I try and make it. I want to make every moment count so I can look at the happy times, and I think that's what keeps me going through the day." Her sense of empowerment does not, as with her middle-class peers, stem from a sense that everything will fall into place; rather, she must painstakingly will herself to be happy.

Boundary Cases of Upward Mobility

If exploratory experiences are indeed a middle-class disposition, we would expect upwardly mobile emerging adults to learn to value them. We found signs of this emergent orientation among several boundary cases in our samples. Will, whose mother worked in a billing office and whose father was on disability, grew up in a working-class family where "I used to always hear how we only had ten dollars for the week. We basically lived off of beans

and hamburgers, basically whatever we could get." Will's father passed away when he was in high school, and his mother remarried, this time to a middle-class, college-educated man who works in business and to whom Will grew very close. He reflects: "I think I'm more in line with my stepfather; he has lived a lot, he's been places. I relate more to him and have more understanding for him than I do my mother. I think they are more grounded than I am. My stepdad understands me more than my mom does; she grew up in a southern Baptist church. I go to a Unity church, and she doesn't understand that. My stepfather is intrigued and asks questions." Will notices differences in habitus between his mother and stepfather and is himself now on a more middle-class trajectory, having completed a degree in nursing and now earning more than his mother. While his leisure activities resemble those of the working class—biking, watching television, hanging out—he likes to imagine himself like his stepfather, "wealthy, very free, like being able to travel and go wherever I wanted to go." Thus, he manifests a hybrid of working- and middle-class orientations.

Similarly, Martha, who works in sales at a television production company, is the first in her family to graduate from college. She longs to leave her settled life for the unknown: "Sometimes I think getting canned would mean an opportunity for fresh terra and cutting a few ties and getting out. It's waxing romantic, but nevertheless it's one hell of a daydream to think of myself in some remote location, rising with the sun, roasting my own coffee beans, even splitting wood, for Christ's sake." While she lacks the resources to act on these desires, her tentative rise into the middle class has left her with a taste for new experiences, which remain out of reach because "unemployment also means bye-bye healthcare. All of it's scary." Thus, when upwardly mobile emerging adults acquire a taste for exploration, it may still seem too risky in practice.

As our cross-class comparison demonstrates, the voracious consumption of exploratory experiences is specific to middle-class emerging adults. This disposition bears a "family resemblance" (Wittgenstein 1953) to findings in other studies on middle-class consumption. Our informants have a naturalized cosmopolitan orientation (Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Their

experiential choices are guided by an embodied disposition toward what feels right (Allen 2002), and what feels right tends to conform to the aesthetics of those with high cultural capital (Holt 1998). Further, these feelings are rooted in class-based confidence that they can afford to take risks now without truly risking the future (Henry 2005).

Our analysis brings a new life course perspective to this prior research on class differences in consumer lifestyle by identifying and detailing a lifestyle orientation toward exploratory experiences during middle-class emerging adulthood and the forms of potential cultural capital it cultivates. Although cultural omnivorism as a middle-class lifestyle cuts across life stages, Lizardo and Skiles (2012) characterize the omnivorous disposition as "subject to processes of cumulative advantage and iterative deployment across the life course" (266) and "whose capacity to be transposed into increasingly less canonical experiences and objects increases with practice" (271). We argue that emphasis on exploratory experience consumption during emerging adulthood presents an extended opportunity for developing the omnivore's capacity for transposition. The next section builds our argument by analyzing the temporal drivers of this orientation.

LIMINALITY OF EMERGING ADULTHOOD: BRIDGING PAST AND FUTURE

To interpret why middle-class respondents voraciously consume exploratory experiences, we turn to their recollected pasts and imagined futures. Our goal is not to evaluate the veracity of their perceptions but rather to understand how temporal perceptions influence lifestyle in the present. We draw on extant literature on middle-class childhood and parenting to contextualize our respondents' memories and expectations. After presenting our analysis of the middle class, we turn to our working-class sample to understand if temporal perceptions operate differently across classes in emerging adulthood.

The Temporality of an Exploratory Experience Orientation over the Middle-Class Life Course

Childhood Socialization and the Exploratory Disposition

Strategic but not necessarily self-conscious, the exploratory orientation originates in class dispositions acquired in childhood. Most middle-class informants describe intensive childhood involvement in a range of activities such as sports, music, volunteering, and art. They recall how parents encouraged both diversity and competency, not pressuring them into one specific activity, or later a career, but rather inviting them to pick things they enjoy and become good at them. For example, Zach, a single, 24-year-old nuclear engineer, rattles off a list of childhood enrichment activities—sports, intellectual clubs, and leadership activities—as well as extensive travel on family vacations. Most respondents recall such activities as positive and normative, signaling the childhood origins of their implicit sense that exploratory experiences produce cultural capital.

These emic descriptions of childhood experiences are consistent with the literature on childrearing and class cultures. Middle-class parenting is governed by what Hays (1996) calls the ideology of "intensive mothering," which dictates that the process is to be "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive" (54). This intensity manifests in the parenting style of "concerted cultivation," in which middle-class parents deliberatively foster children's development through organized activities (Lareau 2011). Likewise, Vincent and Ball (2007, 1065–6) write about the "enthusiasm for 'enrichment' activities" that the "professional middle class" has for young children. These experiences are to be playful so that children learn to enjoy accumulating cultural capital. The embodied ease with which our middle-class informants explore, even amidst anxiety about whether they are doing enough of the right things, reflects this childhood socialization.

However, the lifestyle orientation toward exploration in emerging adulthood is not simply an extension of childhood or a form of arrested development; it also anticipates settled adulthood in which the responsibility of middle-class parenting brings stridency and stress. As Vincent and Ball (2007, 1071) put it, "Rather than being marked by an apparent ease, as Bourdieu

seems to suggest, the process of inculcation is hectic, even frantic." Time pressure—both objective and subjective—is experienced most intensively by highly educated parents in dual-career households (Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Sullivan 2008). This is exacerbated by increasing emphasis on experiential consumption for children, which, by definition, unfolds in time (Robinson and Godbey 2008). Because our respondents have been exposed to these practices both in their own childhoods and in observing parents they now know, this informs their model of "settling down." Thus, they anticipate that having children will bring a period of intensive parenting and an end to self-oriented exploration. Our data show that this motivates voracious exploration and the delay of settled adulthood.

Aversion to Settling Down (Yet)

Just as they hesitate to acquire material objects that might tie them down, many of our middle-class informants eschew serious commitment to romantic partners, or even to living in a particular location. Zach (24) explains that getting into a long-term relationship at this point in life is problematic:

> Let's say I'm dating someone with a nontransferable job; they own a shop here. And I get this job offer to move somewhere super cool like, Maui or Bali or something, right? Good benefits, good times, yet I'm deeply involved in this person. What do you do? You can't just be like, I've got this cool thing that I've gotta do, so either come with me and drop your life here, or I'll see you later. Or do you make that concession? I guess I'm not ready to make concessions. There's a whole lot of the world I haven't explored, so I'm not ready to start taking other people's thoughts and opinions into account.

For Zach, marriage, a focal sign of the next life course stage, limits opportunities for exploratory experiences. Many informants date, and dating experiences help them learn what they want in a partner and are a source of stories. However, these emerging adults are wary of the strictures of a committed relationship.

Although the bachelor stereotype features noncommittal men,

female informants also share these concerns. Samantha (22) reflects that she does not want anyone "tying her down" quite yet. A bit older, Nalya (26) describes what she would like to tell her grandchildren about her life. Through this narrative, feelings about commitment and relationships emerge:

> I would want to really emphasize I did all these crazy cool things. Like I went to Guatemala and backpacked, and I worked at the White House, and I lived in San Diego, and I traveled to Egypt one summer.... I think it's really important people do that. Because I have a lot of friends that did get married at 20, and they don't do anything. They're living in the same town, and the same house, and their lives seem so boring. And I'm like, don't you want more for yourself? Life experiences, or a sense of identity apart from being a mom or a wife, or anything? Because I think these are the years when you build up who you are as a person.

Nalya sees exploratory experiences and the resulting "crazy cool" stories she accumulates as core to establishing her identity, and she hopes that these will be the stories by which she will be remembered. Such exploratory experiences, she believes, cannot be accumulated when one is committed to people or place. This creates a sense of time pressure during emerging adulthood.

Anticipation of Married, Settled Life

While Nalya and Zach's narratives evoke a cosmopolitan or nomadic lifestyle, they see this as a phase that will pass. Most of our informants imagine that in five years they will be married and living in a stylized home, either with children or getting ready to have them. The details of how or where this will happen are often sketchy, and many of them squirm in their seats when the question is asked. Nonetheless, their imagined futures include signs of settling.

When asked where she expects to see herself in five years, Hillary responds: "I'd like to imagine myself in a—with a partner of some kind. Eventually I'd like to have children. I don't know if that's in the next five years or not, but eventually." Zach echoes this

expectation:

> I see myself starting to consider marriage, because biologically you've got to start looking around at least somewhat early. I want to be able to retire without kids.... My dad was 24 and my mom was 22 when they had my brother. Now they're in their mid-fifties balling it up. They don't have any kids to support; we're self-sufficient. They are doing better in their careers, and they're just having a good time.... So, I wait until I'm 35 or 40 when I have kids, I'm going to be 60 before the kids finally get out of the house, which still isn't really that old, but still, what's left at that point? It's nice to have some years afterward.

Zach hopes to control when exploration and fun occur, but he is certain that neither will occur during childrearing years. He even imagines ahead to his retirement years, anticipating new opportunities for exploration during what Schau et al. (2009) describe as an "identity renaissance." Before then, however, Zach expects the time between marriage and empty-nest retirement to be long and filled mainly with domestic experiences. He negotiates the tension between his desire to accumulate both exploratory and domestic experiences by sequencing them, prioritizing exploration now while expecting domesticity later.

Consumer research identifies the value of the experiential in cosmopolitan lifestyles (Holt 1997a, 1998; Thompson and Tambyah 1999), identifies a subculture for whom cosmopolitan exploration becomes a permanent lifestyle (Bardhi et al. 2012), and suggests that consumption is becoming more "liquid" (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2015). Yet our informants expect an exploratory lifestyle to give way to domesticity and a more "solid" lifestyle in settled adulthood. The demographic evidence suggests that for most, this imagined settled future represents reality. As of 2010, 78% of American women with at least a bachelor's degree had a biological child by age 40–44, and more than 90% ultimately marry (Livingston and Cohn 2013). While their disposition toward the experiential will likely continue, informants imagine a different lifestyle orientation and set of priorities in the near future.

Tension between Normative Life Experiences

Such imagined transitions to settled adulthood come with trepidation and drive voracious exploration in the present. Alan, 29 and engaged, discusses the prospect of having children:

> A: Kids are kinda scary because it's such a big change.... Suddenly you're just responsible for this whole other being, and it's the focus of your life, and it will be at least five years until you have some big experience. Maybe not quite that long. But I guess you have to be a whole lot less selfish. At this point we're still pretty selfish about it. Like, buying a car and drinking wine after work. I still get to go to concerts on the weekend or work late, but once you have kids, it seems like you gotta be really efficient.... I wanna have kids. I've just sort of always thought...life isn't gonna be complete without having kids, because it's such a fundamental biological part of life. And, it's such a major experience....

On the cusp of marriage, Alan projects a laid-back, "go with the flow" attitude through most of the interview and feels that he has been "lucky" with experiential opportunities. The commitment of marriage no longer worries him. Instead, he anticipates and fears losing exploratory opportunities with his wife once they have children. Nevertheless, childrearing itself is an experience he does not want to miss. Exploratory experiences may continue vicariously through children, as settled adults become concerted cultivators (Lareau 2011). But such experiences will be focused on the child, not the self. As a result, Alan asks his wife if they can wait a year before having children so they can squeeze in a few more exploratory experiences.

An exploratory experience lifestyle and settled adult lifestyle are not only in tension, but are emically constructed as mutually exclusive. In Nalya's words:

> I think it's a hard time [now]. It's not necessarily always fun. There are times you step back and wonder if you're doing the right thing. Is it okay that I'm not settling down or putting roots down somewhere? Is it okay that

> I'm just kind of following whims and moving to different places or focusing so much on myself? … At the end of the day, I would rather be one of my single city girlfriends or a *Sex and the City* character than a friend who got married at 20 and lives in my hometown. I would much rather be still fighting it out in the real world than settling.

Nalya frames exploring versus settling as her only options: she lives either like a *Sex and the City* TV character or like her staid married friends. Despite this tension, the choice is clear. Accumulating exploratory experiences now is essential to developing her identity since, as she notes, "these are the years when you build up who you are as person." She squeezes in exploratory experiences at every opportunity, taking a quick trip to Machu Picchu in December, securing internships in interesting cities, and summering in Greece. Yet she wants to get married and have children and describes the prospect of not marrying soon as "scary." The challenge, as she describes, is how to settle down without settling.

In our view, the voracious consumption of exploratory experiences during emerging adulthood helps to resolve ambivalence over settling down. We theorize that our middle-class informants are engaged in a prospectively retrospective process of consumption in which imagined futures shape current consumption. In this process, they both desire and fear a more settled, domesticated future in which they expect exploratory experiences to be scarce. In response, they delay settled adulthood so that they can voraciously accumulate exploratory experiences. This proactive future-orientation toward consumption practices is analogous to the middle-class proactiveness in financial investment strategies identified by Henry (2005). Here we see middle-class emerging adults building a reserve of potential cultural capital, hedging against imagined scarcity. Investment here is tacit—our respondents rarely use investment metaphors to describe what they are doing. Yet like financial investing, practices are motivated by anticipated change in opportunities for accumulation over the life course.

Ready for the Transition

Our evidence primarily speaks to informants' contemporaneous lifestyles and current consumption based on their imagined futures. However, our boundary cases, who are moving from emerging to established adulthood, suggest that a shift in orientation does happen. These informants feel ready to move on to a more settled life. Thomas reflects: " I think my life does look different now that I'm in the relationship. I do a lot more of the same things that I enjoy with her. Whereas when I first moved here, I was definitely in exploration mode.... I went out more; I just tried a lot of different things. And it's certainly not like that now. So, I sort of feel like the settling process has begun. But in a good way. I mean I certainly feel like I know myself better now, and that will probably keep happening more in the future." Like other informants, Thomas describes the experiences he has had as what he wants to tell his grandchildren. His description of his partner also evidences the value he places on exploration. However, he feels like he had his time for exploration and is comfortable transitioning to a more settled life. Thomas crinkles his nose less than other informants when discussing the imminent prospect of commitment milestones; he is concerned with how to get there rather than with pushing it back. Our other boundary cases also report being "tired," "full," "ready," able to move onto the next life stage, armed with a sufficient stock of exploratory experiences.

Behaviorally, our boundary informants are starting to make the transition as well. Alan, who is engaged and wants some more exploratory experiences with his new wife before having children, is nevertheless becoming more domestic. Refrigerators of typical middle-class emerging adult informants are almost empty, as life is lived primarily outside the home. Alan and his fiancé have a refrigerator full of leftovers in pots from meals cooked at home, sauces, and vegetables from the local farmer's cooperative. Much of their furniture is still an aestheticized hodgepodge of used and donated items; however, they have begun to curate their collection with distinctive pieces. He proudly describes renovating their house: "You know that [passage to another room] wasn't there before we moved in." This emerging domestic orientation indicates transitioning into settled adulthood.

Figure 1 depicts our temporal model of middle-class lifestyle during emerging adulthood: rooted in childhood habitus and shaped by imaginations of settled adulthood. While childhood socialization attracts our informants to exploratory experiences, they also expect and hope for settled domesticity. While both lifestyles are seen as desirable, they are viewed as antithetical, creating a tension that is resolved by accelerating consumption of exploratory experiences that are varied, novel, challenging, and nondomestic in the present. The class basis for this temporal orientation toward lifestyle can be explicated through a contrast with the recollected pasts and imagined futures of working-class emerging adults, to whom we now turn.

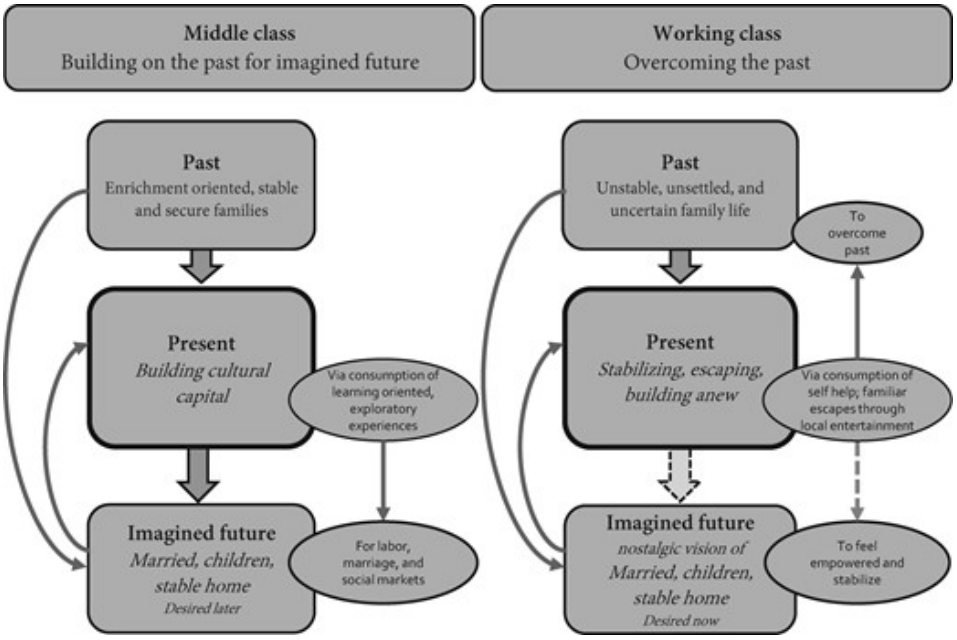

FIGURE 1 The Role of Past and Future in Orientations to Consumption and its Potential effects

Overcoming the Past in Working-Class Emerging Adulthood

Different Childhood Memories

In contrast to middle-class descriptions of childhoods filled with enrichment activities and stability, working-class respondents describe childhoods of flux and isolation, where their families moved often and activities and vacations were rarely financially feasible or even considered. Their memories of school often involve feelings of being unprepared, bewildered, and rudderless.

Memories of unsettled childhoods in our sample reflect the sociological literature on working-class family life—a world of fragile partnerships, job insecurity, and frequent housing and dating transitions (Edin and Nelson 2013; McLanahan 2011). Our data is also consistent with Lareau's class analysis of parenting styles: working-class respondents were not the objects of "concerted cultivation" like their middle-class counterparts, but instead grew up in families that cared for them but where parents often lacked the resources to prepare them for the transition to adulthood.

Like the middle-class informants, our working-class informants feel uncomfortable talking about the future, but this is due to difficulty in imagining the future as well as trepidation over what it will hold. Some respond to the question of what they wanted to be when they grew up in a self-deprecating, mocking tone; for example, Jillian, a 25-year-old line cook, shrugs, "Um sure, veterinarian, or something along those lines. But I don't think I'd become a veterinarian now. Like all kids want to be doctors or like firefighters or something. So, yeah I wanted to be a veterinarian for a while, but yeah I never went to school for that, so..." Her vision of the future remains vague and undefined; she only knows it will not resemble her childhood ideals about grown-up life. Others simply were unable to imagine their futures, even when pressed. Mindy admits: "I never really wanted to be anything. I've never really thought about it." Likewise, Benjy explains he had, "No clue. I had no clue what I wanted to do when I was a kid."

Some maintain that uncertainty and lack of control prevents them from planning. Rob explains: "If I had like goals, like real live goals, then there could be a lot to let that down. But I don't have a whole lot I want right now. I mean, what I am doing now could change in a couple years...[I am] floating. Whatever happens next, happens, and I will deal with it when it happens. It is scary sometimes. Just take it day by day. Hopefully it will all work out in the end." Yet since childhood, Rob has learned that counting on things working out is bound to fail. In short, both middle- and working-class emerging adults hesitate to imagine the future but for very different reasons. For the middle class, the future signifies restricted possibilities for exploration but also expectations of domesticity and security; for the working class,

the future feels uncertain, and imagining it too vividly might lead to disappointment.

Striving for Stability

Class differences in temporal orientations toward the future are also evident in narratives about starting a family. For working-class respondents, being settled means being stable. Settling down with a partner and raising a family is spoken of longingly; respondents want to have children young rather than wait until they have accumulated more experiences. Kevin, a single customer service representative at a grocery store, said wistfully: "Mainly I like stability out of life. It sounds kind of corny, but I just want to be one of those pops who sits in the armchair with my wife, watching the *Dick Van Dyke Show* and stuff like that. Growing up, I moved around a lot and I never really had a solid family structure, so that is something I have always wanted. A quiet, secure, household where everything is fine." Still, he says, relationships are "*way* in the back burner," as "I never know what hours I am going to be working." Informants use idealized images of American family life, often from the 1950s and 1960s, that portray stable families, traditional gender roles, homeownership, and everlasting love. These images often stand in sharp contrast to their own pasts.

Idealized domesticity also saturates discussions of dream homes. For many working-class respondents, the dream home reflects the craving for ontological security that is pervasive in homeownership societies (Saunders 1984). Whereas middle-class interviewees defer ownership to avoid being tied down and losing out on exploratory opportunities, for the working class, there is no perceived lifestyle opportunity cost to ownership; the issue is lack of financial opportunity to construct the domestic life craved in the present. Yet, while they long for a lifestyle anchored in tradition, loyalty, and familiarity, they have little faith that they will find a person they can trust, a love that will last forever, or a home of their own.

Our only working-class respondent to describe deferring settling down as a choice did so in negative judgment of others. Allie, a 32-year-old secretary with a two-year degree, is searching for a

relationship like her parents', who met in their late teens, married, bought a home in their early twenties, and have been together for over three decades. She laments:

> A lot of people are more into education now and getting the job first and getting settled in their career. It is more important where things are so much more expensive. They want to be settled before they think about being responsible for another person. Some people are majorly selfish and don't want to give up that single lifestyle, being able to go and buy whatever they want. I haven't come across anyone in the last three or four years that has wanted to be in a relationship and wanted to be you know quote unquote boyfriend or girlfriend. They want to casually date.... I mean, to me, I am the marrying kind.

Allie's narrative embraces the traditional life course, but shows an awareness of an alternative view on emerging adulthood as a period of investing in the self. She rejects this as a selfish, irresponsible, consumerist lifestyle. While her portrayals of unmarried peers evoke a choice not to settle down, most of our working-class respondents see marriage as desirable but unattainable because they do not feel financially prepared or stable. Conversely, we see not only a lack of opportunity to explore but also a lack of interest in doing so.

In sum, for working-class respondents, a completed transition to adulthood seems desirable but not achievable, whereas for middle-class respondents it is achievable but not yet desirable. Note that our sample is restricted by design to young adults who have not yet married or had children. Working-class young adults who are married and/or have children may have different points of view on their past and future. Our purpose here is to compare across classes those emerging adults who have not yet formed families, a classic milestone in the transition to adulthood. Both data sets include life history interviews but with very different story lines. The middle-class interviewees focus their narratives on the things they do, whereas the working-class emerging adults focus their interviews on things that happened to them. While neither group felt comfortable talking about the near future, the middle-class informants had a clearer expectation of

it. These discourses mirror findings of demographers that an extended transition to adulthood is a function of choice for privileged youth versus constraint for the disadvantaged (Berlin et al. 2010). Our analysis shows the implications of class-differentiated experiences of emerging adulthood for consumer lifestyle and the potential effects of those lifestyles on future trajectories.

DISCUSSION

In the past, before she was married, a single woman would stock a hope chest with household items, tablecloths, and dishes that she imagined would provide material resources needed in her married life. While hope chests are now uncommon, we see here a stockpiling of a different sort: both women and men in the middle class accumulate exploratory experiences for their future selves. Exploratory experiences are so valued by the middle class that their consumption becomes part of the habitus and potentially a source of embodied cultural capital. Yet these emerging adults imagine a future where their lifestyles will not permit such exploration. As a result, they make a space temporally, delaying marriage and childbearing to voraciously consume exploratory experiences, preparing for that imagined future scarcity.

This life stage orientation toward exploratory experiences is classed. Both of our samples consist of young adults who live independently from their parents but have not yet started families of their own. However, middle-class informants experience this time as full of options, to change jobs, move cities, defer commitment, and seek adventure and challenge in their leisure time. In contrast, working-class informants feel forced to change jobs and housing and want stable relationships but find them difficult to attain. As a result, they value familiarity and comfort and seek relaxation and escape in their consumption lifestyles.

Previous research on class cultures has identified the valuation of the experiential at other stages of the middle-class life course. Building on that work, this article details and theorizes the specific drivers and manifestations of that habitus in emerging adult lifestyle and its potential sociological effects. Other scholars

have shown that emerging adults invest in the future through career advancement, gaining credentials, and financial savings. We identify a different type of investment strategy—consuming an array of novel, challenging experiences forms a transposable knowledge base that could potentially accrue into a rich pool of potential cultural capital.

Experiential Consumption, Conversion Value, and Social Reproduction

Consumer research and sociology literatures detail how people make investments by developing cultural knowledge within particular fields (Haines, Poland, and Johnson 2009; Kozinets 2001; McAlexander et al. 2014; Rössel 2011; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thornton 1996). In many cases, these investments have circumscribed conversion value, meaning they are deployable as cultural capital in limited contexts, both higher status (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Lizardo 2006) and lower status (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013). For instance, Arsel and Thompson's (2011) "indie" consumers invest in embodying and protecting particularized knowledge that has low value outside of the indie context. While all cultural capital is field dependent, certain arenas have broader conversion value than others—what Arsel and Thompson, informed by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), describe as more generalized cultural capital, typically dictated by those in higher status positions and providing advantages to those in circumscribed social fields. While consumption of indie music, art, and clothing makes up a subset of consumption of middle-class young adults in this study, our informants' omnivorous taste for experiences that are novel and challenging cuts across a broader range of activities. The stories and embodied knowledge from these experiences could yield transposable knowledge that has broad conversion value because these are valued in a wide array of middle-class social fields. In some ways, this knowledge nests between that which has "generalized conversion value," easily acquired popular knowledge for connecting across social positions to form social bridges and weak ties, and that which has "restricted conversion value," more difficult-to-acquire knowledge that allows for building close ties (Lizardo 2006, 783–

4). While knowledge from exploratory experiences can dip into both categories, it also sits between these, providing distinction from the working class but remaining a common practice for those in the middle class, and supplying fodder for connection to those holding similar orientations and knowledge.

Our data speak most directly to current consumption during emerging adulthood. Triangulating our evidence with previous scholarship about class cultures in both childhood and settled adulthood allows us to speculate about the potential long-range effects over the life course. We have suggested that the ability to transpose knowledge and stories from exploratory experiences is an important life skill for middle-class success. Specifically, we expect the forms of cultural capital engendered by exploratory experiences could influence success in middle-class labor markets, marital selection, and childrearing in ways that reinforce class privilege.

Labor Markets

Knowledge from exploratory experiences likely provides middle-class advantages in labor markets. Most obviously, exploratory work experiences build résumés. However, the breadth of knowledge acquired through a broad range of experiential exploration could provide fodder for expanding social networks and the job opportunities that come with them, as people with diverse cultural tastes have diverse and advantageous network structures (Lizardo 2006). The narrative tools and insider perspective that exploratory experiences provide also help: extracurricular and leisure experiences contribute to hiring decisions in elite firms. While candidates' résumés may look similar, those who can deploy knowledge from exploratory experiences to connect with the hiring agent are more likely to land a job, which disadvantages those in the lower-middle and working classes in subtle ways (Rivera 2012). Furthermore, employers in elite fields are attaching increased value to soft skills —whether communication skills, stress management, tolerance for ambiguity, creativity, grit, active learning, and self-awareness —in addition to academic credentials and hard skills in their hiring decisions (Burke 2015). Studies of workplace cultures in fields such as advertising and consulting also show how such soft

skills matter for performance evaluation and promotion as well as hiring (Koppman 2016; Reid 2015). Exploratory experiences likely allow middle-class young adults to demonstrate their appreciation and awareness of such valued traits through the development of narratives of self-growth, challenges, and mastery.

Marriage and Child Rearing

A common knowledge base and habitus helps young adults to relate to others via homologous experiences, which likely contributes to marital homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). When describing their ideal partners, middle-class participants invariably described someone similar to themselves, partners who would also have accumulated exploratory experiences. A common stock of analogous experiences signals the values, types of knowledge, and dispositions that form the basis for mutual understanding and, in many cases, marital harmony (Cherlin 2014) in middle-class married life, which further solidifies class positions and differences. Illouz (1997) describes how modern ideals of "communicative love" require middle-class habitus. Although young adults' cultural discourse of love emphasizes random, spontaneous sparks of attraction, these "sparks" may arise out of and reproduce existing patterns of social stratification. The shared appreciation for exploratory experiences and the kinds of stories that accompany them represents for Illouz "a cultural mechanism that accounts for (and makes possible) the fact that romantic sentiment carries, translates, and reproduces the social structure while simultaneously unleashing the disorderly passions of the heart" (211).

The exploratory disposition will also likely be deployed in socializing children. While middle-class young adults expect an end to personal experiential accumulation, their valorization of the exploratory will remain important (Lareau 2011; Vincent and Ball 2007). Thus, through practice, they will tacitly teach their children to value what they value, investing now in their children's futures. The particular practices that become important for each generation are not static, yet the underlying orientations of the social position stay the same (Holt 1997b,

1998).

Contemporaneous Effects of Imagined Futures

Our research also builds on recent research focusing on how imagined futures shape current consumption. Scholars across a range of fields are beginning to incorporate insights about future-orientedness. Recent experimental and psychological consumer research on hedonic forecasting, backcasting, hyperopia, psychological distance, and regret influence show that, while people cannot accurately predict the future, perceptions of the future shape behavior in the present (Ebert, Gilbert, and Wilson 2009; Gilbert and Wilson 2007; Hamilton 2014; Keinan and Kivetz 2008). Similarly, sociological research on future-orientations is also on the rise due to the recent revival of pragmatist social theory. Imagined futures are core to pragmatist understandings of human agency, which is grounded in expectations and experience (Emirbayer and Maynard 2011; Frye 2012; Gross 2009; Schneiderhan 2011).

Yet few studies on the cultural aspects of consumption have examined the role of the future in an in-depth manner. There are exceptions: Marion and Nairn (2011) show how teenagers' identities, constructed through a bricolage of fashion consumption, are rooted in a complex relationship with peers, childhood, archetypes, and parents. As teenagers imagine their fashion choices in 10 years, they sketch archetypical attire representing stereotypical middle-class female occupations. Here, we examine instead how both past socialization and imagined futures shape experiential consumption in ways that reinforce social class boundaries. Another notable exception is Sullivan's account of why high-income families accumulate unused, expensive consumer goods, "a kind of 'virtual leisure' for those with no time…with an intention to use them at some imagined future time when there will be time" (Sullivan 2008, 20–1). In the present study, we see consumers doing just the opposite—accumulating experiences now for an imagined future in which there will be no time. Analogous to the anticipated pleasure that motivates consumer purchases (Beckert 2011; Simmel 2011, 261–4), anticipated dearth is a key motivation for voracious exploration and experience accumulation. Similar to knowledge

from a college education hyper-accumulated over four years, exploratory experiences provide both gratification in the present and a reserve of broad knowledge for imagined future selves. Yet instead of book knowledge, what is accumulated is transposable, experiential knowledge. While the financial value of an experience consumed in the marketplace cannot be reclaimed later, the knowledge accumulated retains value as potential cultural capital.

Regardless of whether imagined futures come true, they contribute to behavior in ways that amplify social (dis)advantage. Recent studies demonstrate how this happens for disadvantaged groups. Frye (2012) finds that young adults in Malawi have overly optimistic images of their futures, leading them to cling to student identities long after their realistic chances of educational achievement have diminished. Conversely, Henry (2005) and Silva and Corse (2016) find that many young working-class Americans lack the capacity to imagine a future, making it difficult to construct life strategies likely to lead to upward mobility. In the present study, we see the same for the working class and the inverse for the middle class: clear yet anxious imagined futures lead our middle-class informants to take action now, accumulating cultural resources in the form of exploratory experiences that will help them to maintain their privileged class positions.

Future Research

Our evidence, which consists of snapshots of our informants at one point in time, provides insight into current experiences and how expectations of the future influence lifestyle in the present. These contemporaneous perceptions of the future—as opposed to what the future actually holds—are crucial for understanding this particular life course stage. Our data do not directly reveal how experiential practices shift over time or how experiential capital converts into other types of resources. The embodied valuation of exploratory experiences will likely persist in later life stages but will be practiced differently. Perhaps this means reframing domestic experiences by highlighting their exploratory qualities —learning to jar baby food or figuring out how to cook with garam masala, for example. Perhaps it means producing

exploratory experiences that can be enjoyed with children, such as family vacations. How these dispositions manifest at other stages of the life course remains fodder for future research.

Further, this study focused primarily on the lifestyle orientation of emerging adults to understand consumption and its role in reinforcing advantage in this life stage. Accordingly, a sample was selected that would be the most likely to exhibit an exploratory orientation: those who are single, live outside their parents' home, and do not have children. By focusing on the middle-class basis for exploratory experiences, we highlight the different dispositions and practices exhibited by those in the working-class sample, but this research was not designed to be a full analysis of the working class at this life stage. Future research should also examine within-class variations in orientations toward exploratory experiences and imagined futures with a broader diversity of informants who are at different points in their varied transitions to adulthood.

Data Collection INFORMATION

Data for the middle-class sample was collected in medium and large US cities between 2005 and 2008 by the first author. Data for the working-class sample was collected in medium and large US cities by the third author. All authors were involved in data analysis and writing; the first author took the lead with the middle-class sample, and the third author took the lead with the working-class sample.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEWEE CHARACTERISTICS

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Name	Age	Relationship status	Data set/ social class	Occupation	Educati
Alan	29	Engaged	Middle	Manager, energy company	UG; MA
Alexa	26	Living with boyfriend	Middle	Development, nonprofit organization	UG
Donald	24	Married, child on way	Middle	Own business, student	UG
Ellen	28	Committed relationship	Middle	Just finished Peace Corps and AmeriCorps	UG
Eric	26	Single	Middle	Technology manager, *Fortune* 50 company	UG
Hillary	28	Single	Middle	Contractor with urban planning firm	UG
Jane	30	Single	Middle	Information technology, *Fortune* 50 firm	UG; MBA
Joseph	33	Single	Middle	Real estate developer	UG; MBA

Kelly	27	Single	Middle	Engineer	UG; MBA
Linda	25	Dating	Middle	Theater/ assistant at university; applying grad school	UG
Maria	27	Newly single	Middle	Policy and advocacy, nonprofit	UG
Nalya	26	Single	Middle	Law student	UG; Law
Rae	26	Single	Middle	Interior designer	UG
Samantha	22	Single	Middle	Family support specialist for nonprofit	UG
Tammy	30	Married to a doctor	Middle	Between prof. jobs; retail/ MBA program	UG MA; MBA
Thomas	32	Serious relationship	Middle	Development, nonprofit organization	UG; MBA
William	26	Recently married	Middle	Recent MBA graduate, in transition	UG; MBA
Zach	24	Single	Middle	Nuclear engineer, defense contractor	UG
Allie	32	Divorced	Working	Secretary	Associat

Amber	28	Dating	Working	Baker	HS
Andrew	27	Dating	Working	Mechanic/ body work	HS
Benjy	27	Married	Working	Firefighter	HS
Bradley	26	Single	Working	Server	BA, pilot
Cory	35	Single	Working	Bartender	HS
Craig	25	Dating	Working	Server	HS
Delores	34	Dating	Working	Server	HS
Ellie	25	Dating	Working	Nurse	Associat nursing
Emma	25	Single	Working	Bartender	HS
Gabe	30	Single	Working	Server	HS
Heather	26	Dating	Working	Bartender	HS

Ian	28	Single	Working	Grocery store	HS
Jillian	25	Single	Working	Line cook	HS
Kathleen	24	Single	Working	In and out of school	HS
Kelly	28	Single	Working	Line cook	HS
Kurt	26	Dating	Working	Firefighter	HS
Lauren	24	Single	Working	Barista	HS
Mindy	24	Single	Working	Retail	HS
Mitchell	26	Dating	Working	Retail	HS
Monica	31	Single	Working	Starting school, service	HS
Rebecca	27	Dating	Working	Server	HS
Rob	26	Single	Working	Unemployed/ National Guard	HS
Steven	25	Dating	Working	Service	HS

Tim	26	Dating	Working	Auto service shop; former car mechanic in the Marines	HS
Vinny	27	Single	Working	Security Guard	HS
Wally	30	Single	Working	Grocery store	HS
Martha	28	Dating	Working, mobile	Server	BA, Engl
Will	24	Single	Working, mobile	Nurse	BA, nurs

APPENDIX B

EXAMPLES OF QUALITIES OF EXPLORATORY EXPERIENCE

Qualities	Additional data excerpts
Voracious variety seeking	**Zach,** *on applying for jobs*: Location didn't really matter at all. I actually wanted to do something that would probably give me some chance of going international at some point. So, multinational companies were certainly in there. Just, things that had travel associated with them… **AU:** What if you had gotten offered a job in a town of 10,000 people in the middle of Kansas. Would you have taken it? **Zach:** No. I already did that once. An internship where I went to [a small town]…it just sucked…

	Alan, *on resisting routine to engage in activities before he has kids*: Well, when I first moved here, I always talked big about getting involved with some sort of volunteer situation…. Take advantage of concert venues and restaurants. Spend some time in the park…it'd be nice to, to, get as much out of [the emblematic] experience [of living in this city] as possible. We live around the corner from this big concert venue bar… So, it'd be nice just to do more of that. Be out there, essentially be part of it, instead of having a house, commuting to work, working, coming back and watching a movie here, playing music or whatever.
	Jane: I'd read all these articles about how to relocate successfully so I joined a soccer club, and these happy hour groups, and all these crazy things just to kinda meet people. And, then went exploring…don't laugh, but like every weekend, (Laugh) I would like pick a new—a different city in the metropolitan area and go explore it and learn the area.
	Maria: *On what she likes about living in this city*: I really like the amount of culture that's available and just all the activities that there are to do and there's so many free activities. You can go to a concert in the park, you can go see an [esoteric] competition… There's always festivals and a lot of, I think, more unique things. *(see also deep novelty)*
Deep novelty	**Samantha:** Yeah, besides the traveling…I really just want to see things and if I went to Costa Rica it's kind of like, oh, I can travel a little bit, I could go down to South America because I haven't seen that part of the world, and I think a lot of it's just centered around traveling and seeing different cultures, and that's always really interesting to me. Learning different languages. That's another thing. I'm teaching myself Italian and sign language, and it's just opportunities of playing around.

	Nalya, *on travel:* I've traveled all over Europe, Asia, Australia, Central America. I'm going to South America in May…. [I] go to Greece in August…I went to three different continents last year alone. *At another point*: I really liked Costa Rica. But I think it's more like the way we did the trip. Like it was just me and a girlfriend, like we packed up our backpacks, like we had no idea what we were doing. We just had like this stupid, what are those books, like Lonely Planet. And, we kinda just like got off the plane and totally winged it for like two weeks. And it was just like crazy. Like we were staying in these little like hostels in these little dirt towns. We did all this like cool outdoor stuff, like canopy zip lines and…hiking a volcano and hiking through rain forests, and meeting like tons of people along the way. *Job:* I just found [a summer job with an attorney in a large city] on the Internet. I was kind of like I wanna go somewhere new I've never gone.
	Maria: [I] never wanna look back on my life and, you know, ever regret not taking advantage of an opportunity or doing something. I hope I'll be able to tell [my grandkids] that I took advantage of everything I wanted to do. I hope that I can say to them I traveled a lot and that I did something really good with my life. Tried to make a positive difference. I hope I had an exciting and crazy life. *At another point:* I just made the decision to move across the country by myself, which was…I didn't really know what I was doing. It was kind of on a whim. I feel like I'll be adventurous when it comes to certain things. When it comes to food, I'll try anything. Even camping or hiking, I'll try it. If it's around the water, I'm a little bit more nervous. Like, [a friend] and I had done the triathlon and we're both petrified of the water. Traveling [to] different places, I think it's healthy. It's not like I'm one of those people that's gonna go like bungee jump off a cliff, but…
	Tammy: I did go to one of every sporting event, one hockey, one basketball, one football, because sports are very big in [this Midwest college city], so I had to go check out all of them. I went to one girl's softball, went to one of everything. *(see also childhood experiences)*
Doable challenge	**Samantha:** [This life stage is] definitely a little scary because you don't really know what's going to happen, but I think it's very, very exciting…I think it's just kind of the idea I can do anything, and I don't really have anything tying me down.

	Thomas: [Living where I did abroad you] do have to be careful where you go. And so, it was tough just never feeling completely safe and everything. But at the same time, I loved it there; I really did. But at first I felt lonely…. I had to change how my expectations…. Here [in the US], if I wanna get food at any, almost any hour, I can. You know, if I wanna walk somewhere, you know I can do that. Just sort of, whatever I wanna do is available.
	Mark, *on needing challenge in work/life:* Everything just sucked; there was nothing going on [at my rural internship]. We would go to the Dairy Queen or Wal-Mart for fun…. And there are all these townies sitting around, and it just wasn't fun; there wasn't anything to do. The job wasn't interesting; that might have been why it left a bitter taste in my mouth.
	Ellen: I liked adapting to a new culture. I liked only conversing in a different language. I liked that I had a different worldview when I came back. I liked…just sort of…comparing, you know, my culture to this new culture, and realizing that there's a lot of the new culture that I really like. And then there are things about my culture that I don't like, but just being accepting of both cultures. I liked meeting new people. I liked that it really put me out there and it made me…it made me change. It made me push myself, and to just get out of my comfort zone. So, I liked all of that.
Nondomestic	**Hillary:** I mean, I moved out here with basically clothes. *At another point:* I got my bookcase; I bought at a garage sale and I painted, so I really like that. My TV stand and dresser I got from Sarah. The stuff in the living room; none of it's mine. We wanna get rid of it, because it's been in the apartment forever, the couch and the futon, and [my roommate and I] hate it…it's been inherited.
	Thomas: I live with three guys…the total bachelor pad, you know. Fridge full of beer, eggs, and mayonnaise and stuff. Not much more.

	Maria: [When I move next] I think most of the furniture I probably would get rid of because a lot of it's been donated or I picked it up on Craigslist. There's a few things that I would wanna keep. Like I think I would definitely move the bookshelf because it's beautiful and [my ex and I] spent a lot a time working on it. I made a headboard out of driftwood that I had kept. I mean, we had done it together…but like the bed was from like, you know, I picked up at the Salvation Army when I moved out here, so it's not that good quality of a bed. I took a couple painting classes so there's a lot of art—I would take like that sort of stuff…
	Zach: While I think some people look at mortgages as a big ball and chain and shackle that you attach yourself to, well I'm stuck with this crap forever…if you look at it from my standpoint, it's almost like a security blanket if you really think about it. I can always sell it, and I'll easily get out from under it and make money. And, I can always come back [here]. If I move away for a long time, I'll always have a house there. It's nice.
Childhood experiences	**Zach:** …my dad's traveling throughout his entire life; I think he has a pretty wide experience to draw from. And they passed that down to us. You know, generally you should always be trying something new. New, new, new, new. We are neophytes, I guess that's what it is…if you hadn't tried food you couldn't turn it down. You had to eat it. *On high school activities:* I was just in a lot of clubs, tons of clubs…you know, all that honor crap that you are in when you are in high school…all these nerdy, engineering clubs too…and then went to college and was in various positions in the sailing club there, and like honor societies and such and such. I was an RA for a real long time there… residential involved leadership, yada yada. And now I am in young engineering network clubs, and I am the social director for that, so. You know, a nice big roundabout thing.

	Jane: We have a "Leave It to Beaver" family. We had dinner together every night, didn't do a lot a TV watching or video game playing, we played a lot outside…I think my parents were amazing. They raised us with definite ability to be strong women. Like, so my parents taught us everything from light construction to how to cook; nothing was off limits. You know, my parents really tried to like buy toys for us that—like Legos and other things—that would promote creativity. And my dad, he tried to get us into baseball and sports and stuff, and my mom, we took ballet classes and things like that—so really tried to be really well rounded. My parents were really good about not gender pigeonholing us. And then also a sense of responsibility and honesty, integrity—really tried to make us be good adults, I think.
Tension between exploratory and domestic experiences	**Alexa:** …I've noticed…as I grow older, that there is such a thing as a biological clock, and, it's really been interesting to wanna hang out with my friends' kids. Just being like oh, that looks like a really amazing experience. And while I don't feel ready at this point, I do see myself being ready at some point. So I think that well now, I mean, think like oh my gosh, my friends don't go out anymore, they just take care of their kids because they're babies, and you can't leave them at home. And (laughs) it's kind of like daunting and scary now…
	Rae: I don't want to jump into getting married right away. I would like to date someone for a year or two and then be engaged for a while…a while meaning a few years. Be engaged, and have fun being that couple for traveling and you know, and then get married, and then wait a few more years till kids and all of that. But the problem is, I'd really like to have kids before…I'd like to start somewhere between 30 and 33, maybe even 28…Right now I'm having a great time alone, doing my alone thing, and then growing into something that I'm having a great time with that person and we're growing together, and then that is stabilized enough that we go, okay, now we can have kids; we've had all our fun and done all that great stuff; you know we've come home at 4:00 in the morning, we've…done whatever, because we can… and when you have kids you can't do whatever you want because you can. Your life is no longer selfish; someone else is relying on you and you have to devote all of yourself to children…I want to go out and do all of it first, so I don't regret not having that time…

Nalya: I want a crazy life where I travel the world. I think I'm scared of…like moving to [the city] and like living in a cookie-cutter house in suburbia. And, just working at this firm forever and getting married. I'm afraid of that because it sound boring, and it sounds like I gave up. I don't know, I guess it's not what I want. It makes me like sick to think of settling and not having like a really crazy exciting life. *At another point:* I would like to meet someone, but I don't know. I feel like it's gonna get harder as I get older, because now I'm gonna be 27, this year, and I know that's not very old, but there is that kind of societal pressure like: "oh, a lot a your friends are getting married, why aren't you?"

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